

# IEDRC FEATURE

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## BRINGING THE LIBRARIANS TO THE PEOPLE

by JEAN-MARC FLEURY

A sign of the times -- or of the increasing sophistication of rural people -- is that "barefoot librarians" might soon follow in the footsteps of barefoot doctors in the rural areas of developing countries. Like their health counterparts, these new librarians will extend to the rural areas services that have traditionally been concentrated in the cities -- in their case, access to sources of knowledge and know-how.

The need for "information auxiliaries" in developing countries has been talked about for some time. Now, the island of Mauritius has taken concrete steps to make its librarians tools of development. In order to increase the effectiveness of its limited number of professional librarians, Mauritius had been interested in initiating a librarianship training program for "extension workers" who, after a short course and after being acquainted with the real needs of the population, would provide valuable services to agricultural extension workers, health personnel and local authorities.

It was soon realized, however, that the already existing services would need to be consolidated and reinforced before they were extended to rural areas. Mauritius has 25 libraries to serve a population of close to a million people, crowded on 2000 square kilometres. Only a half-dozen librarians are fully qualified, and most of these work for the university or in government departments. The directors of the other libraries do not have any formal training having generally learnt their job on the spot. And while they display great inventiveness and imagination in carrying out their duties, their lack of training and of formal recognition has limited their authority and influence. Before asking them to direct teams of auxiliaries, it was necessary to upgrade their skills and status.

One way of doing this would have been to send them to foreign schools, an unrealistic approach given the scale of the program. As well, it has often been found that the content of the courses followed abroad has little application to local situations. An alternative could have been to hold an intensive course, as has been done in some countries, but this would have meant depriving institutions of their best employees for long periods. Mauritius therefore decided that the best solution would be to offer a part-time course at the university.

A Canadian organization, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), supported the project, and the first Library Training Experiment began in Réduit, in April 1978. Because the few local librarians were already very busy, the university called on a graduate from the University of California, Mr Cyril Treister, to direct the program.

During 15 months, three days a week, 24 young people -- 15 of them already in charge of libraries -- followed an unusual training course. For one thing, textbooks were not available and mimeographed notes had to be prepared presenting the subject matter in a very condensed form. Then, instead of giving a series of formal lectures completed by compulsory readings, Mr Treister transformed the classroom into a kind of laboratory. Through simulations the students assumed the different roles played in a library, progressing from simple user through to director. At the same time, local experts were invited to talk about the operation of audio-visual equipment, printing technology, the internal workings of publishing and distribution enterprises, and the features of some of the most advanced libraries, among other topics. Even a psychologist came to explain how library personnel could anticipate the requests of users by observing non-verbal cues.

This system of lectures and simulations kept the students deeply involved. What they learnt matched local needs so closely that they could often put it into practice the very next day.

Despite the importance given to basics, the original concept of "barefoot librarians" was not forgotten. Numerous field trips were made and sociologists and heads of government and industry research departments came to describe specific national needs in the area of information.

Steps were also taken to increase contacts between the librarians and the population. On some occasions, children's days were organized during which libraries were opened to the young. Not only did the children not make a mess or destroy books, but their mothers stayed until the end to put everything back in place. Far from reducing their prestige, this operation increased the respect of the population towards librarians.

Finally, some projects were started during the training program and are being continued, which should have an important impact on the development of the country. For example, a bibliography of Mauritian agricultural research is being compiled and some collections of precious ancient manuscripts and reports are being indexed.

The success of this experiment can be measured by the fact that close to a hundred people applied for the course when it was offered a second time, in September 1979. Enrollment was limited to 20, but it is expected that more and more librarians will become available for outreach in rural areas. The course is now part of the University's regular program and Mrs Marie Benoît, a Mauritian librarian, is now in charge. As for Mr Treister, he is planning to write a textbook synthesizing the Library Training Experiment. Plans are under study to have this book published by IDRC. Such a manual should assist Third World librarians interested in implementing a low-cost, effective training program.

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